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A Dinosaur Summer;
A big movie and a major travelling exhibit should lift interest to new heights

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Body

We tend to think of them as having come and gone rather quickly, but the evidence of their bones tells us otherwise.

Dinosaurs were the dominant land animals on earth for 140 million years. Compared to Homo sapiens, whose entire history stretches back a paltry 350,000 years, their story is an epic in every way.

They were the largest animals that ever walked the earth. The most famous of them all, Tyrannosaurus, was the blueprint for all the flesh-eating monsters that inhabit the popular imagination.
THE SPECTATOR

What helped seal their place in our mind is the fact that their sudden disappearance after an unimaginably long ***reign on earth*** contains all the elements of a great detective story, as well as echoes of our own current ecological problems.

The dinosaur industry -- books, toys, museum exhibits, etc. -- is a healthy one from year to year, mainly because successive crops of children hook into their seemingly irresistible story. This year, though, these archaic beasts are getting a public-relations boost of brontosaurian proportions.

Jurassic Park, Steven Spielberg's $70-million movie adaptation of Michael Crichton's bestselling novel, hits North American screens next Friday with an intense merchandising campaign behind it. It's the most hotly anticipated movie of what's shaping up as a very busy summer season.

Then, on Aug. 20, the largest travelling science exhibition ever mounted -- devoted entirely to dinosaurs -- pulls into Ontario Place for a three-month sojourn before moving on to Japan.

The 25,000 square-foot exhibition, called Dinosaur - The Greatest Show Unearthed, will tour more than 30 cities over the next seven years. It's the result of a five-year expedition by a Canadian-Chinese team of paleontologists. The scientists' work took them to China's Gobi Desert, the Canadian Arctic and the Alberta Badlands. In the process, they unearthed 11 previously unknown species of dinosaurs, including the largest Chinese dinosaur ever found.

The irony of the juxtaposition of these two major dinosaur-themed attractions is that Spielberg's movie is about a futuristic dinosaur theme park in which genetically engineered dinosaurs run amok. While The Greatest Show Unearthed doesn't advertise living dinosaur clones, it promises a memorable experience for all ages.

Paleontologist Phil Currie, one of the co-ordinators of the Canadian-Chinese team of dinosaur researchers and an advisor on The Greatest Show Unearthed, says the current flurry of scientific and public interest in dinosaurs is unprecedented.

"We're in the midst of a major renaissance," says Currie, who heads up the dinosaur research program at the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology in Drumheller, Alta. "Things sat stagnant from the 1920s to the 1970s because there was no money available for research. Now the level of interest in dinosaurs and the amount of research being done on them is the highest that it's ever been in history,"

Which goes to show you the kind of marketing genius Steven Spielberg i

We have known of their existence for only 150 years. It was in 1842 that English anatomist Richard Owen concluded that new fossil finds belonged to a previously unknown animal group. Owen coined the term dinosaur from the Greek words for terrible (deinos) and lizard (sauros).

Since then, scientists have catalogued about 350 known species of dinosaurs, half of them in the past 20 years. The consensus is that these 350 types represent a small percentage of the total number of dinosaur species who roamed the earth for millions of years.

The dinosaurs evolved, flourished and died out during the Mesozoic Era. This geological time frame is divided into three Ages: the Triassic (250 to 205 million years ago), the Jurassic (205 to 135 million years ago) and the Cretaceous (135 to 66 million years ago).

Fossil evidence indicates dinosaurs first appeared in the late Triassic Age. But it was during the Jurassic Age that they flourished. The most spectacular animals of that period were the sauropods -- giant four-legged, long-necked plant-eaters such as the 70-foot, 30-ton Brontosaurus, the Diplodocus and the Barosaurus. The Cretaceous Age saw the arrival of the theropods -- predatory flesh-eaters such as the 45-foot, seven-ton Tyrannosaurus and the 29-foot Albertosaurus.

Recent research has seriously undermined the traditional view of dinosaurs as early reptiles. In fact, the vast majority of dinosaur researchers now accept a direct evolutionary link between dinosaurs and birds, rather than reptiles.

"The dinosaurs really didn't die out," says Currie. "There are over 8,000 species of them alive today as birds. Birds are the direct descendants of dinosaurs. Using modern classification systems, we would even call them a subset of dinosaurs."

The changing view of the dinosaurs' place on the evolutionary scale is just one the ways our view of them is changing. Also fading rapidly is the general opinion of dinosaurs as mainly tropical animals who flourished in a warm, humid climate in specific parts of the planet. Increasingly, the evidence indicates dinosaurs migrated in herds and thrived in moderate and even polar climates.

Visitors to The Greatest Show Unearthed will see 30 full dinosaur skeletons, including the 30-foot-high Mamenchisaurus, the largest dinosaur ever found in China. Also on display will be dinosaur embryos, eggs, footprints and some species of dinosaurs never or rarely exhibited before.

"Even I was blown away by it," says Currie, who had a daily personal involvement in the preparation and mounting of dinosaur skeletons for the show but was out of the country when the exhibits were finally assembled. "You work with bits and pieces of it all the time, but you didn't really get to see the results. When I walked into it, I was amazed."

The exhibit likely rekindled some of the wonder felt by Currie when, as a six-year-old growing up in Port Credit, he first got hooked on dinosaurs. By the time he was attending high school in Oakville, Currie was convinced he wanted to be a paleontologist and devote his life to dinosaur research.

Currie's role model as a youth was Roy Chapman Andrews, a swashbuckling American paleontologist of the '20s and '30s who inspired the character of Indiana Jones in the popular series of movies by -- you guessed it -- Steven Spielberg.

Spielberg's timely movie will cash in on the fascination people of all ages feel for dinosaurs. Currie speaks from personal experience when he describes the nature of dinosaurs' hold on the imagination of children.

"For kids, it's mostly the fact that dinosaurs are the biggest, the meanest, the longest, the heaviest and the most ferocious," he says. "Kids also like the nightmare aspects of dragons and other fantasy animals. The difference with dinosaurs is that they were real, which makes them infinitely more fascinating than anything kids can imagine."

The saga of the dinosaurs touches a lot of different chords in adults. For Currie, what's most amazing about these animals is that they became the longest-lived dominant land animals in the history of our planet.

"Mammals co-existed with dinosaurs and evolved at the same time, yet they couldn't do anything until dinosaurs became extinct," Currie says. "Dinosaurs lived everywhere in the world and they colonized everything. It's turning out that they're far more complex than we ever imagined. Even though there are some with relatively small brains, there are other ones with relatively large brains. They really are animals that deserved the success that they had."

Paleontologist Dale Russell, of the Canadian Museum of Nature, has gone so far as to suggest that the Troodon, a relatively small dinosaur that had the largest brain size relative to its body, could have become a upright-standing biped with manual dexterity and a human-sized brain if it had survived.

Undoubtedly, the single most fascinating mystery about dinosaurs is: How did they become extinct? It's a question that increasingly gnaws at us as we ponder our own precarious place in an environment we have seriously compromised.

Currie believes part of the impetus for the increased funding of dinosaur research in the past two decades is humanity's growing awareness of its own mortality as a species. If the dinosaurs were the most successful land animals ever, yet they nevertheless disappeared, what does that say about our long-term chances?

The extinction theories most commonly advanced are a sudden change in climate to which dinosaurs could not adapt, epidemics, a major cycle of mountain-building that began at the time and, as a finishing touch, the cataclysmic collision of an asteroid with the earth, touching off global fires.

In late 1990, scientists discovered a crater 180 kilometres in diameter in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. It's the largest such crater on the planet, and could have been caused by the impact of an enormous object from space 65 million years ago.

The only thing scientists know for sure is that the study of fossil beds from the Cenozoic Age, which immediately followed the Mesozoic, shows not the slightest trace of dinosaurs. Something terrible happened to them, and it happened abruptly by normal evolutionary standards.

Scientists have discovered evidence of a dark, sooty asteroid cloud in fossils of plants from that period. One scenario is that the asteroid collision killed off all the plants, which spelled the doom of the herbivores, followed by the carnivores that fed on the herbivores.

The small mammals of the period would have been spared because they fed mainly on insect larvae that ate dead plant matter, which may be why we're here today, thinking about dinosaurs.

Currie says "ecological stress" was the background cause of the dinosaurs' extinction.

"They were weakened considerably by a situation that was beyond their control, which is the same kind of situation we're creating today. There are some warnings in that."

Graphic

Photos, except for lower left, by Ray Giguere, Special to The Spectator A 'fleshed out' Albertosaurus greets visitors at the pavilion entrance of Dinosaur - The Greatest Show Unearthed, now in Edmonton. Cover photograph: An inflatable Tyrannosaurus - a tethered hot-air balloon - looms over spectators on opening day in Edmonton. Digitally-edited photograph, original by Ray Giguere, Special to The Spectator. A Tyrannosaurus meets visitors in a scene from the movie Jurassic Park. A baby Hypacrosaurus (duck-billed dinosaur) is caught by an Ornithomimid at The Greatest Show Unearthed. Sinraptor, a newly-discovered dinosaur from the Gobi Desert in China.

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